

Rainey

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— a certain gentleness about the character that “doesn’t stay for very long.”

Ma Rainey had a lot of baggage to contend with, says Johnson. She was creating the mold of the famous Black female recording artist. And as they say, it can be lonely at the top.

“Not forgetting that her daily life was White people not looking at her, spitting on her. If she could she would probably beat them up,” Johnson says with a laugh. “She also had a masculinity to her that made it so she could battle through the recording world.”

But some of the men in Ma’s life also knew that she was a commodity, especially Mel the studio owner. She could make him money. Lots of money. More money than even Ma is taking in.

As Duffy Epstein, who plays Ma’s manager Irvin, puts it: “The band makes 25 bucks a session, Ma makes 200 bucks and Mel’s gonna make 10 grand.”

Irvin straddles the line between the Black musicians and the White studio establishment.

“He prides himself on getting along with the Black musicians, but whatever sympathy he has, and whatever feelings he has, in

society, he can only take that so far,” says Epstein. “He can’t pal around with these guys, he can’t, whether he wants to or not, I’m not really sure. He’s as nice to them as he can be.”

Jones says the White studio owners exploit the Jewish culture in order to connect themselves with the Black blues musicians.

“These groups of people would never come together to produce one product if wasn’t for this one thing, called the Blues,” Jones said.

Acting Out

“Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” is not a simple play to produce. There’s a large cast, difficult language and timing. Simply put, August Wilson ain’t easy.

“Just because you’re Black, doesn’t mean you speak the language of August Wilson,



what he did, beautifully, better than anyone I’ve ever read, he captured a lexicon, a rhythm, a musicality in the African American language that some of us have actually shunned from or marginalized. And he captured it and embraced it and made it music.”

Jones, who has acted in other Wilson plays, including the role of Elder Joseph Barlow in last year’s Portland Playhouse production of “Radio Golf,” knows the difficulty.

“I did ‘The Piano Lesson’ and I played the character of Doaker, and I had a 20-minute monologue, it’s all about the piano,” Jones said. “It’s 20 minutes. Now that’s nothing compared to some shows, like a one-act play, and I’ve done one-act plays and I gotta tell you, the 20-minute monologue was harder because it was roundabout, non-sequiters, things that didn’t connect, I had to start to imagine, create images in my

head about what I was saying because it was not coming. It was not coming. I had to learn things about memorization that I never thought about before. I had to learn about how the brain works, I had to learn how to nourish the brain, when the brain passes short-term memory into long-term memory. I had to focus on memorizing at particular times of the day because I know that there are times that the brain is working a lot and time when it isn’t.”

Jones said eventually he had to get out of his own way.

“We don’t want to find out we’re stupid,” he said.

With only four weeks to bring the production to stage, Jones said it has definitely put a strain on the cast.

“I’ve asked them to be uncomfortable and continue to be uncomfortable, but in that process, they felt they were in it together,” he said.

“Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” runs from April 6 to May 1. Previews run from April 6-8. Opening night is April 9. Shows run Wednesdays through Sundays. Of 20 performances, 13 shows are currently sold out. Visit www.portlandplayhouse.org to order your tickets while they last.

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